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Focus | San Diego will recycle sewage into drinking water, mayor declares



The Pure Water project is expected to break ground next year and ultimately generate a third of San Diego's drinking water by 2035.



By **Joshua Emerson Smith**

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Within five years, San Diegans will be sipping and bathing in water recycled from sewage, city officials declared Wednesday.

A deal between local environmental groups and city officials to pursue a plan known as Pure Water San Diego, in lieu of upgrades to an aging wastewater treatment facility, seems to be coming to fruition after more than two decades of brainstorming, formal planning and small-scale testing of water purification technologies.

Both projects carry hefty price tags: at least \$3 billion for the water-recycling system and roughly \$2 billion for the facility overhaul. In either case, that means significant increases in water bills for residents and businesses.

In fact, as the city has inched toward Pure Water, it has already boosted water prices by double digits over several years — and it has warned ratepayers to expect even bigger hikes if the plan moves into full construction and operations mode.

In recent years, a broad coalition has said Pure Water's expense is worth the goal: creating a more stable, localized and conservation-minded water supply by reducing San Diego's overwhelming reliance on imported purchases.

"Support for our Pure Water program has never been stronger than it is today," Mayor Kevin Faulconer told the California Coastal Commission at a hearing on Wednesday in San Diego. "That wasn't always the case 10 and 15 years ago. The fact that we have our environmental community, our business community, our political leadership across the spectrum that is so strongly supporting this is one of the hallmarks of this innovative program."

Without hesitation Wednesday afternoon, the commissioners unanimously approved San Diego's request to put off retrofitting the [Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant](#) for at least five more years, so long as the city continues to pursue the sewage-to-water recycling project. The waiver frees up cash the city would have spent upgrading the facility, enabling it to instead save those dollars for building up to three new water-recycling

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1 the nation that doesn't meet federal clean-water
scharges from the site have little to no impact on

the surrounding marine environment.

The [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) also must approve the latest waiver request, and it's expected to do that soon.

"We have determined that the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment facility and its effluent discharges do not adversely affect the ocean environment and meets all the federal requirements for renewal of the permit," said Tomás Torres, the EPA's Water Division Director for the Pacific Southwest.

In the past year, San Diego officials and their outside advocates have tried in vain to get federal officials to grant a permanent waiver for the Point Loma plant, which would insulate the city from any environmental group that might sue in the future to force a retrofit of that facility.

The mayor's office declined to comment on the status of this broader lobbying effort, which is mostly like aimed at ensuring that ratepayers wouldn't have to shoulder the bill for both the Point Loma and Pure Water projects. Those ratepayers include cities that send sewage to the Point Loma facility and get drinking water from the city of San Diego's network of reservoirs and pipes.

Time and time again, San Diego has been able to obtain five-year waivers for the Point Loma plant from the state Coastal Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency since Congress passed the Ocean Pollution Reduction Act of 1994.

Local green groups haven't always been happy with the situation, and they eventually sued the city over the repeated waiver requests. A settlement agreement spawned the current alliance that's backing Pure Water.

When the city first floated the idea of a sewage-to-drinking-water system in the 1990s, it faced strong opposition because of reasons such as fear about contamination, the yuck factor — some critics called it “toilet to tap” — and accusations of discrimination stemming from a proposal that the recycled water be sent to communities south of Interstate 8. That proposal was promptly scrapped.

In recent years, after many community education efforts mounted by advocates of water recycling, polling has suggested that more than 70 percent of the county's residents support the concept.

Since the city agreed to take another look at developing a water-recycling program more than a decade ago, groups such as San Diego Coastkeeper, the San Diego County chapter of the Surfrider Foundation and the Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation have promised not to sue over continuing the Point Loma waivers. Some local green activists have even gone so far as to lobby environmental organizations outside of the region to honor the same strategy.

“We've been working really hard, the environmental groups locally ... to get to the point where we're at,” said Marco Gonzalez of Encinitas, an attorney with the Coast Law Group and Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation who has long been at the center of the negotiations. “And we've had to go to the greater environmental groups throughout the state so they understand what we've been doing.”

At the Coastal Commission's meeting Wednesday, there was widespread praise for the deal.

“This is absolutely the right thing to do,” said San Diego County Supervisor Greg Cox, who also serves on the commission. “The track that has been set up with the city of San Diego and the environmental community and the business community gives me full confidence that we're going to get to the point where project Pure Water will be addressing our water needs in the future.”

Representatives of the businesses community also expressed support.

“For our members, the businesses in San Diego, they really do understand — after several years of discussing it — the importance of water reliability and how important that is to the success of our region,” said Sean Karafin, executive director of policy and economic research for the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. “By investing in Pure Water, instead of an unnecessary conversion of the Point Loma plant, our community can achieve multiple benefits with maximum value.”

A slew of local environmental groups and Sierra Club California conveyed their enthusiasm for San Diego's blueprint.

The only opposition came from a smaller advocacy organization called the Ocean Outfall Group in Southern California. It favors San Diego's water-recycling program but also wants guarantees that, in the long run, all of

the wastewater treated by the Point Loma facility would then be recycled by Pure Water. The city's current approach would not recycle all effluent from the Point Loma plant.

"We would like to see a condition that when they have to come back five years from now ... that they come back with a plan ... for what's going to happen to the rest of the effluent," said Steve Ray, a member of the Ocean Outfall Group.

The Pure Water project is expected to break ground next year and ultimately generate a third of San Diego's drinking water by 2035.

The first phase, scheduled to be completed by 2021, would produce 30 million gallons of drinking water per day at a facility to be built across the street from the North City Water Reclamation Plant near Miramar Road.

Up to two more facilities would follow — one at the former Naval Training Center grounds on Harbor Drive and another, if needed, at the South Bay Water Reclamation Plant on Dairy Mart Road. This second phase is expected to add 53 million gallons per day.

If the vision is carried out fully, Pure Water would divert about 100 million gallons of the current 140 million gallons of wastewater currently processed each day at the Point Loma plant. The facility serves about 2.5 million residents.

In October, the City Council agreed to speed up the Pure Water project to its present timeline. Before then, it had planned to generate about 15 million gallons a day by 2023 and 30 million gallons per day by 2027.

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